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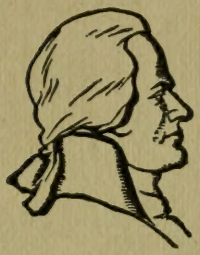
[Modern business Talks]

WORDS THAT GRIP

Some business letters violate all rules of grammar and rhetoric and yet get business. Others are works of art. Neither kind ever produces the right results without working, first and last, for the customer.



MODERN BUSINESS
TALK No. 24

ALEXANDER HAMILTON INSTITUTE
NEW YORK

Words That Grip

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READING ASSIGNMENT

The current Reading Assignment consists of three parts: (1) this Talk, (2) Chapter XI to the end of Volume (12), "Business Correspondence," and (3) Problem 12.

The primary object of business reading is not pleasure, it is to give you power, enlarge your capacity for service and increase your income. At the same time, study that is not enjoyed is not likely to return big dividends. Does that mean you may as well quit if the subject does not interest at first? Not at all. On the contrary, you can make yourself like it—you can do that with anything worth while. It is just a case of picturing to yourself what you are going to get out of it. The more vivid you make the picture, the more determined you will be to realize it.

Words That Grip

There "is the necessity that the correspondent have clearly in mind as he writes, the specific and definite purpose of the letter; and, equally important, a definite knowledge of the impression or the series of impressions that he wishes to make upon the reader in order to gain the desired end."—Page 201, Chapter XII, Volume 12 of the MODERN BUSINESS TEXT.

Some time ago a large mail-order house tried by experiment to discover the relative value of two selling letters. Both were form letters but had the atmosphere of personal correspondence. The stationery and mechanical construction were the same in each. The first letter, after some descriptive matter, not necessary to quote, read as follows:

We are writing you to call your attention to our AA machine for use in your dairy. We should like very much to have the privilege of demonstrating to you the great utility of this device, and of showing you how much it can help the farm housewife in her daily dairy work. We hold that a woman can accomplish her work in half the usual time when equipped with an AA. Let us prove it to you. Write for our circular. Do it today!

The second letter was worded like this:

Last Tuesday morning we received a call from Mr. and Mrs. James Monroe, who live on their farm, two and one-half miles south of Mill Valley. They had come to the city for the ex-

press purpose of examining in person our line of dairy equipment. On April 5, 1913, Mr. Monroe bought from us one of our AA machines, and this purchase led to last Tuesday's visit. "I found the machine such a wonderful help to me," Mrs. Monroe said to us, "that I told my husband we'd better run up and see for ourselves what else we could get. We are busy people and our time is worth money, but two or three days in the city will be well spent, if we can get hold of other dairy equipment that will help us as the AA machine has done. You know that time is worth money on the farm, too; labor-saving equipment in the dairy means actual dollars to us, and a great many of them."

If dollars count with you as they do with Mrs. Monroe, let the AA machine earn them for you. Just write the one word "dollars" on the enclosed card, with your name and address, and mail it to us. We have vital things to tell you.

A thousand letters of each kind were sent out to farmers' wives, the lists being selected so that the first set of letters should reach prospects of a class exactly like that to which the second set was addressed. It was the aim of the company to make all the factors in the experiment equal except the letters themselves.

Sixty-seven inquiries came in reply to the first letter; two hundred and thirty in reply to the second. The former, moreover, dragged out over a period of many weeks, while the latter were received within a fortnight.

The difference in the value of the two letters lay chiefly in their effect on the prospects. The first was simply an abstract statement; the second, a specific record of definite action on the part of a definite person. Nothing grips the reader so strongly as a narrative of achievement. An abstract essay may

be interesting for leisure hours, but if you want to catch a customer on the run, lay hold of him boldly by some actual demonstration or story of accomplishment. Observe that in the first letter every statement is vague and weak. In the second, the assertions are concrete and positive. The day was Tuesday; the callers were Mr. and Mrs. James Monroe; their home was on a farm two and one-half miles south of Mill Valley. Mrs. Monroe talked, and her words are quoted.

The Dollar-Test

For men in business, the dollar stands out as the most conspicuous part of every letter that goes out of the office. In one way or another, money is the object of nearly every business communication dropped into a mail box. Yet it is a strange fact that the majority of men in business devote but little thought to the close relation that exists between the letter and the dollar. Of course, there have always been numerous reasons for the success of one firm and the failure of another, but among these reasons the ability to write good letters or the lack of that ability has been of no inconsiderable importance. As you read the twenty-fourth reading assignment you will probably gain a clearer conception of the truth that the art of conducting business correspondence is worthy of the highest place in business management. It requires a keen knowledge not only of words and phrases, but of the appeals that move the human mind.

Not long ago an advertiser contemplated an extensive campaign by mail. In order to profit by the mistakes of others and to secure the best possible results, he made a study of the causes of failure of letters which he received. He began by classifying the letters into good, fair and bad. It occurred to him that if he could determine approximately why the letters of others did not lead to business in his case, it would help him to avoid the same pitfalls. From 800 letters received during a period of six months, and roughly classed as described, the following facts were compiled:

14 secured an order
26 may get business later
79 were classed as "good"
252 were classed as "fair"
429 were classed as "bad."

The great majority of these letters did not secure business because of certain fundamental facts. Among them were these: (1) Irrelevancy to the prospect's business. (2) Weak appeals. (3) Style either wishy-washy or blunt and offensive. (4) Failure to arouse the buying desire even where selling arguments were good.

Word-Juggling

To the letter-writer words are tools. The carpenter who uses a chisel to do an auger's work is not a whit more inefficient than the letter-writer who makes wrong selections from his store of words. A large house sent a circular to its trade in which occurred

the following sentence: "Let us supply you with standard advertisements like the following—every one packed with selling appeals, every one short and *trite*." The writer evidently thought that "trite" meant "snappy" or something similar. Many dealers must have laughed at the claim that they were to be helped by ads that were admittedly "worn out."

A chief correspondent was talking to members of his staff recently. "Sit down and write out your definition of the words 'lurid' and 'reek,'" he said. "They are more or less common words and most of us think we know what they mean. I want to see whether we do or not."

These trained writers dashed off their definitions. When they were turned in, the chief smiled. "Now go look them up in the dictionary," he said. The men got a shock when they did so. Not one of their definitions was strictly accurate.

The correspondent should strive to find words that give just the right coloring, that strike responsive chords and that suggest to the reader what may not have been described fully—what perhaps could not be described fully. "Saves miles of walking around the kitchen," is the way a kitchen cabinet advertiser pictures the saving in walking that his cabinet affords. "Miles" is graphic—much more so than if he had said "numerous steps." Properly selected words have great suggestive power when rightly applied.

Obviously the writer of business letters should have at his command a rich and forceful vocabulary. He should know what is correct usage even tho he some-

times directly disregards it. Some insist that the "language of the people" rather than the language of the educated should be used in letters in order to introduce the personal element; that it often pays to be ungrammatical. They probably mean that they prefer natural and simple language to the ornate and pedantic. They mean that such expressive slang as "make good," "produce," etc., is legitimate and useful. They mean to say that "deliver the goods" is just as good as "carry out the agreement"—or perhaps better.

Mental Adjustment

To make a study of the subject of correspondence involves making a study of the mental characteristics of those who are to receive the letters. This study in turn leads directly into the method by which the desired impressions are produced. Adjustment to the reader, all-important in successful business correspondence, must take account of the character, the language, and the mood of the person addressed. His character may be learned from the letter he writes or from his business position, age, nationality or credit rating, and so also with adjustments to language. Adjustment to mood, however, is largely a matter of emotion. Every one adapts his message to the mood of a friend when writing a social letter; why should he not consider moods in writing business letters?

A department store in a small city sends a letter by way of welcome to each family that moves into its vicinity. When a child is born, a savings bank

sends a letter to the parents. In each case advantage is taken of a temporary mood, and business is increased thereby. This presents the simplest phase of adjustment to the moods of the prospect, since one already knows his mental attitude. Your ability to enter into sympathy with the moods of others—or better still, to create the proper mood for the reception of your message—means dollars in business.

When writing to unknown men of unknown moods, the problem is somewhat complex. The mental conception of the individual customer is less definite, yet opportunity for using those primal appeals to which all humanity responds, are better. Moreover, every man is most natural when alone, and he is usually alone when your letter reaches him. To some extent, we are all actors. Consciously or unconsciously we react to the stimulus of those with whom we come in contact. All really live behind the faces they present to the world. The letter goes straight to the real man, and if you can make the appeal to his emotions strong enough, you create the mood you desire.

A letter written by a small mercantile house read as follows:

DEAR SIR:

Yours to hand and noted. Beg to advise that we can't furnish the————. The style you want is long out of date. Beg to say that the————————would be more suitable for you. Will be pleased to ship same on receipt of order and remittance.

It should be apparent even to a superficial student

of human nature that such a letter produces in the mind of the recipient no favorable impression. It may even anger him and direct his trade elsewhere. The man who dictates such a letter is certainly ignorant of even the simplest maxims of the art of correspondence. Yet a surprisingly large number of business letters are built upon this model.

A large garment house in an eastern city found it necessary to reorganize its entire correspondence department. It was not getting adequate returns from its sales letters, and a careful investigation disclosed a decided lack of specialized knowledge of letter-writing. Yet some members of the correspondence staff were being paid high salaries. Today the letters sent out by the firm are strong business pullers. The psychological appeal is in them. They talk directly to the self-interest of the prospect. They go chiefly to women, and they have the chatty, confidential air of a personal conversation; at the same time they appeal first and last to the natural desire of women for good clothes. Here is a brief example, taken at random:

> Sometimes we think the story told in this book is the most interesting thing ever written about clothes. Will you turn, please, to page 60? We should like to read aloud to you every word printed there and on the subsequent pages—not because of the mere interest you will find, nor because we are in the business of selling clothes, but because of the benefit and information YOU will derive. Remember that our success depends wholly upon what we do for YOU.

There is one secret of effective letter-writing. A

letter to be successful must have the YOU in it, either openly or concealed. In order to get that YOU into letters, it is necessary to study the art. It cannot be had otherwise.

Courtesy and Sincerity

Since usually the initial sales letter is unsolicited by the recipient, it is in the nature of an intrusion, demanding time, attention and possibly money. In one letter that was both courteous and interesting the writer frankly admitted the intrusion, but offered to put his time in writing against the reader's time in reading. That letter brought twenty per cent replies from professional men—a difficult class to reach by such means.

Watch some business man open his morning's mail. Note carefully the expressions that flit across his face as he reads one letter after another. You will probably see a succession of frowns, puzzled wrinkles and a look of disgust. At long intervals, his features will relax into an expression of relief. Someone has written an interesting, to-the-point business letter. Every letter you write should thus favorably impress the person who receives it in order to make him do what you want him to do. To write letters of that kind is not easy; but neither is it impossible for any one of ordinary intelligence. Certainly any one who masters the principles which the author so clearly explains in this assignment, can train himself to write red-blooded, profit-making, business letters. To know the essentials to effective letter-writing and

keep them always in mind is your first duty so far as the letters you write are concerned.

Most of the business letters written are conventional, without much human interest and without any gripping power. Your stenographer may be expert and your stationery correct in form, yet the letter may be as cold as a winter day in Alaska. Many letters impress you with a feeling that the writer either wants some of your money or is anxious to get the letter off his hands and be rid of you. Often the whole tenor of a letter seems to be: Send us some of your cash! Do it quickly! Don't lose an instant!

How often the letter contains solemn assurance that health and strength is to be found in somebody's pills, or rhapsodies on profits to be derived from an investment in a certain stock, couched in old transparent terms and phrases! Here are some samples of the kind of "property" expressions which so frequently are found in business letters of all kinds: "If you could only sit here beside me as I write and see the letters of gratitude come pouring in from all over the country"—"Can it be that I have not made myself clear to you? There must be some reason why you have not sent in your order, and it must be my fault"—"As you are one of the first to write me from your locality, I am making you a special confidential offer." Their number is legion.

The Power of Facts

The direct, crisp letter in which the facts and strong points stand out conspicuously, always commands

the attention of the reader and is likely to prove convincing.

A busy merchant was one day struggling with a letter which he wanted to send to a list of persons who had answered his advertisement. After working over the letter for some hours he laid it aside to talk with a business friend who had come in. This friend was a practical man and when told by the merchant of the difficult task on hand he asked the latter if he knew exactly what he wanted to say. "Yes," said the merchant. "I know what I want to say." "Well then, say it just as you'd say it to me," suggested the friend. "Call in your stenographer and talk to me as if I were your sole customer, while she takes down what you say." The merchant did so. He warmed up to his subject and stated the entire proposition so clearly and forcefully that only minor revisions were necessary. The letter brought back an unusually large volume of business. It had facts—vital, interesting facts—about the article, and they did the work.

Hitting the Bull's Eye

Frequently someone is heard to say: "That's a good letter," or "That letter has snap." But that proves nothing at all. When you hear the report of a rifle you do not say, "That was a fine shot"; you wait until you have examined the bull's eye to see where the bullet went. The result is the only fact that counts.

It is unsafe, unsatisfactory, and often impossible to judge the "pull" of a letter before it is put to a test.

Whenever possible, a limited test of the new letter should be made. The value of the letter may be judged fairly accurately by the direct results of such a test. A concern that makes a specialty used by paper box manufacturers sent out a letter written by a member of the firm who had never paid much attention to letter writing except that he always endeavored to express his ideas clearly. His letter violated nearly every principle of letter writing laid down for us by the rule-makers of the old school. After it was tried out, another letter was written by a professional letter writer who advertised his services by mail and who had never seen either the plant or the product. He was employed strictly on his boasted ability to "write letters that pull big orders." Of each letter 250 copies were sent out, care being taken to see that both went to the same class of persons and in the same territory. The letter written by the member of the firm brought twelve trial orders and resulted in a total business of $4,135. Ten of the twelve accounts thus secured are still active. The other letter brought just one trial order on which the gross profit was seventy cents—and the customer has never been heard from since.

The cause of this man's failure was simply that he was not in close enough touch with the company's proposition. He shot at random—and missed.

Most men want to read the letters that come to them. But they are often discouraged by a stereotyped opening, a grovelling salutation or a proposition

that is not clearly stated. A reading of the present assignment will probably convince you that any letter which does not secure the reader's attention with the first phrase is usually ineffective as a business getter. Your opening should make the reader feel that he himself is at your desk, making you talk. If you make that point, you will stay his hand in its practiced course towards the waste paper basket. Be natural and have a "face-to-face" manner. Don't forsake naturalness for the sake of producing a "different" letter. Suggest that you can help the reader and you have his attention. Tell him how, and you have his interest. Prove it, and you are likely to have his order.

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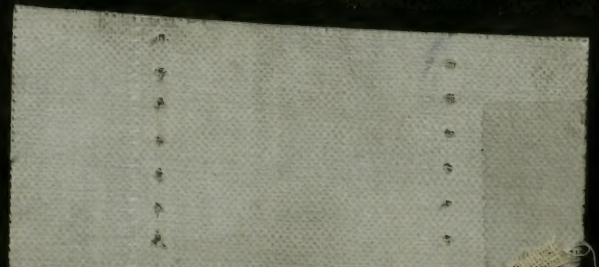

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